

I

I had known that my wife Amy was pregnant for a week or so. I knew that no matter what happened, this event was going to change our lives forever, and even though the delivery date was still many months away, I had already begun trying to wrap my mind around the idea of being somebody's father.

But nothing prepared me for that first visit to the doctor. Amy and I were ushered into a little dark room where a very sweet woman peered into the screen full of squiggly lines, and then she pushed a few buttons. Then she looked at us and said, "There are two people!"

I said, "Excuse me?"

And she said, "There are two people! Two babies!"

I had just begun to wrap my mind around the idea of welcoming *a* baby into our home. But now apparently there were going to be *two* at the same time.

Our preparations kicked into high gear. We bought a larger vehicle to accommodate two car seats and a double stroller. We took all the furniture out of the guest room and replaced it side-by-side cribs. I signed up for a class at the hospital called Daddy Boot Camp so I could learn how to feed and burp and swaddle a baby.

I knew our lives were about to change forever, and I needed to get ready.

II

All of us have had, or will have, moments like that in our lives - events that happen that become boundary markers of a sort - where our lives were one way before, and forever different after. Perhaps you're anticipating such a moment this morning. Perhaps you're preparing to enter into the covenant of marriage. Perhaps you're preparing to graduate. Perhaps you're preparing to welcome a baby into your life.

Or perhaps you're preparing for a less joy-filled event. Perhaps you're preparing for orders for another deployment, or for a divorce to be finalized, or for a sentence to be pronounced. Perhaps you're at a point in your life where you know that there are fewer days remaining in your life than have already come to pass, and you're preparing for death and for the life that is to come.

All of us have had, or will have, events that come in our lives that change our lives forever - events that become boundary markers between what was and is and what will be.

III

And that brings us to our text for today. This fall, we've been tracing the broad outlines of the Hebrew Scriptures, more commonly called the Old Testament. Way back in September, we

read that God made a promise to a man named Abraham and his wife Sarah that this childless couple would one day be the patriarch and matriarch of a great nation, and that in and through this one family, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

And we've been tracing the threads of that incredible promise all along. We've seen this one family grow into twelve tribes. We've watched the twelve tribes become unified into one nation under the leadership of a king named David. And we've watched that unity fray and fracture, first through civil war, and then through foreign conquest and domination.

When we come to our text for today, it's still a little more than 500 years before the birth of Christ. And the promise made to Abraham and Sarah, that in and through their descendants, God will bless all the families of the earth, is all but dead.

The ten tribes of the northern kingdom have been swept into the dustbin of history never to be heard from again. And the southern kingdom of Judah, with its capital city of Jerusalem, where David brought the ark of the covenant all those years ago with singing and dancing, has been utterly destroyed. The Temple that David's son Solomon constructed, once the very dwelling place of God on earth, has been ripped down to its foundations by the Babylonian empire.

Scores of God's people have been carted off from Jerusalem, ripped away

from the Land of Promise and forced to live as exiles in Babylon, and their captors mock them incessantly. The promise that God made to Abraham and Sarah, that their descendants would be more numerous than the stars, and that in and through them God would bless all the families of the earth, seems all but impossible now. The promise that God made to David, that his descendant would reign over Israel forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end, seems to be nothing more than a cruel joke.

And so it's into this context of exile, this context of mourning, this context of deep grief and loss, that the prophet Isaiah speaks. So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Isaiah 40:1-11.

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.*

*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her*

*that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,*

*that she has received from the Lord's
hand*

double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

*"In the wilderness prepare the way of
the Lord,*

*make straight in the desert a
highway for our God.*

Every valley shall be lifted up,

and every mountain and hill be made low;

the uneven ground shall become level,

and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

and all people shall see it together,

for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

A voice says, “Cry out!”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All people are grass,

their constancy is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades,

when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;

surely the people are grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades;

but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain,

O Zion, herald of good tidings;

lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,

lift it up, do not fear;

say to the cities of Judah,

“Here is your God!”

See, the Lord God comes with might,

and his arm rules for him;

his reward is with him,

and his recompense before him.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;

he will gather the lambs in his arms,

and carry them in his bosom,

and gently lead the mother sheep.

IV

See, the Lord God comes.

That’s one of the parts of the gospel that’s most compelling to me. Lots of religions and philosophies have things to say about how we can become more god-like. Lots of religions and philosophies lay out a path by which we can become more divine.

But the gospel reverses the direction of travel. The gospel says that instead of us having to figure out how to get to God, God comes to us, God becomes one of us, God is Emmanuel, which means God is *with us*. God knocks down every mountain, God fills every valley, God smooths every rough surface to be with us.

The Lord God comes with might *to us*, not because of anything we’ve said or not said, not because of anything we’ve done or not done, not because we finally got it right, but because God always keeps God’s promises, because God would rather live and die with us than without us.

Because God became flesh and blood, because God became incarnate in

Jesus Christ, God knows what it is to be hungry. God knows what it is to be thirsty. God knows what it is to love someone so much it hurts.

IV

So my friend, if you find yourself standing at a boundary marker this morning, standing between what was and what is and what is to come, feeling the weight of the world on your shoulders this morning, God knows what that feels like. If you find yourself filled with worry about someone you love, God knows what that feels like. If you're aware that there are more days behind you than perhaps ahead of you, God knows what that feels like, because God is Emmanuel – God with us.

The prophet Isaiah speaks to a people who are hurting, who have all but given up hope, and he says, “In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.”

Advent is a season of preparation. Yes, there are decorations to be hung and gifts to be wrapped and meals to be planned. December 25 will be here before you know it.

But Isaiah invites us this morning to look beyond the tinsel and the lights and the distractions of the season. Isaiah invites us to consider that ours is a God who will move mountains just to be with us. Ours is a God who will fill valleys just to be with us. Ours is a God who has come in Jesus of Nazareth, and ours is a God who is coming again to make all things new.

To a people who are hurting, to a people who are afraid, to a people who have all but given up hope, the prophet says, “In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.”

So, my friend, what rough places in your life need some smoothing out this morning? Are there cracks in an important relationship that need to be patched over? What crooked ways need to be straightened up? Have you been cutting corners or dealing unjustly with someone? What low places need some filling in? What high places in your life might need to be brought down a peg or two?

V

And what about us, in our life together here at First Presbyterian Church? The church calendar is full of pageants and dinners and live nativities and extra worship services. And all of that is good.

But let us not get so lost in all the busyness of the season that we forget that Advent is a season of preparation but also for an event that will quite literally change everything – the coming of Christ again in glory.

Advent is a season of self-examination, of taking stock, of getting ready to welcome the One in whom all of human history and all of human destiny meet.

Advent is a season for remembering that though kingdoms may rise and fall, the word of the Lord will stand forever.

Straightened Out
Isaiah 40:1-11

December 8, 2019
Dr. Ryan J. Baer

Advent is a season for
proclaiming the great mystery of faith:
Christ has come. Christ has risen. And
Christ will come again.

In the wilderness, prepare the
way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Thanks be to God. Amen.